

The Town That Hasn't Felt the New Day

By HENRY L. COMMONS

CALL for Hinky Dink!

If the Hon. Michael Kenna, maharajah of Chicago's first of the first, would invite his soul, let him come to Hamtramck, biggest village in the United States, which still plays the great American game of politics in the good old-fashioned way.

It is assumed that politics in Hinky's ward has changed a bit, if ever so slightly. But in Hamtramck, no. No prohibition, nor short ballot nor woman's suffrage has yet left the marks of its lily-white fingers on the civic throat of our town.

Sixty thousand population, less than 4,000 citizens with the right to vote, the village of Hamtramck, entirely surrounded by the city of Detroit and civic righteousness, holds an election annually for which it takes a year to make ready. And if you count the village of Hamtramck and the township of Hamtramck as one, which is practically the fact, you may figure two of these elections each year.

And Mister Kenna—such elections!

One candidate for village president recently spent \$60,000—according to his own confession—for an office which pays no salary.

Hamtramck is situated in the upper right hand corner of the city of Detroit, much in the same manner as incorporated villages lie within the limits of the city of Boston. It is populated largely by Eastern Europeans who like their schnapps. This community a dozen years ago, before the development of the automobile industry, was a crossroads village with a voting population of 80, nearly all farmers. The big factories, attracted by cheap acreage and low taxes, builded there. Under the eaves of these gigantic plants has sprung a great unit of urban population which steadfastly refuses to annex itself to Detroit, preferring to maintain its own governmental machinery which collects in the form of taxes, and spends annually, huge sums.

A rough estimate of the number of saloons would be 200. These saloons are not blind pigs. Blind pigs aren't counted. We are speaking of regular saloons on a pre-war, pre-prohibition basis, with electric pianos and real beer. Several of these are in the same block with police headquarters. The proprietor of one of them, across the street from headquarters, shut down his electrically controlled orchestra for a time until he found out the boys on the force missed the music "something awful." Now he opens the door when customers put a nickel in the piano, and free entertainment is afforded the police.

Two years ago the voters decided to "clean up" the town and they elected George J. Haas, an architect, village president. Saloons were not only running wide open, but gambling houses, some of the biggest in America, were carting money out of the village in barrels loaded on trucks, and the vice district stretched its crimson-lighted way through a community of residences and schools and churches.

President Haas dismissed the chief of police who had held the office for nearly 20 years. Mr. Haas wanted a new police organization, one that was not accustomed to follow the even tenor of its way amid such surroundings. He brought into the village outside talent, a lieutenant of detectives, who had one of the best records of any member of the Detroit police force. This police lieutenant was Fred Dibble. In just 18 months from the time Dibble moved to Hamtramck to become one of its citizens and officials he was president of the village and George Haas was out of office—beaten in the hottest election ever held in Hamtramck. Haas had discharged Dibble after a year's trial and the day Dibble was let out he announced his candidacy for the village presidency. He did nothing for the next six months but campaign. He carried his entire ticket into office and turned the old crowd out. He won on the same platform that had elected Haas—a promise to clean up Hamtramck. In his inauguration speech Mr. Dibble said:

"Throughout this campaign I have promised, if elected, to give you a clean village. The promise was solemnly made and will be faithfully kept. I am going to give you CLEAN STREETS and CLEAN ALLEYS."

Despite frequent grand jury investigation and reform campaigns, it seems impossible to do much for the civic conscience of Hamtramck. Just about the time the governor and the prosecuting attorney think they have things going smoothly in this town, some assessor will forget to put a \$1,000,000 corporation on the assessment rolls; some public building will cave in or some member of the police force get locked up for highway robbery. Some of the public funds disappear in a manner which can scarcely be credited to so comparatively innocent a cause as inefficiency. For example:

The monster mills of the village turn out many tons of cinders daily. These cinders become great mountains in the yards of the plants. The problem of moving them is annoying, some of the companies being compelled to pay freight on long hauls to get the residue of the furnaces out of the way. One company's board of directors called the superintendent into conference on the cinder problem. This superintendent was a former village official.

"I can get rid of them," he told the board with as-

urance. "The village is using thousands of tons of them on the streets. I'll call the boys up and tell them to come over and help themselves. It's only a short haul."

The superintendent called the proper officials by telephone. A few days passed and the cinders kept piling high in the yards. He called again. No action. He wrote personal letters and in the course of time three dump wagons appeared, each wagon manned by three workmen. They loaded up, disappeared and never came back. More telephone calls, more personal letters, and finally a trip to the village hall to make a last appeal.

"We have all the cinders we can use," the plant superintendent was informed.

He conducted a quiet investigation of his own, which took him to the minutes of the council meetings, the records of the public works department and the treasurer's office. The village was most certainly getting all the cinders it needed.

And the village was paying for them at the rate of \$13.60 a load!

The superintendent gave the cinders to the public



The main thoroughfare of Hamtramck, where the saloon and old-fashioned politics still thrive.



FRED DIBBLE, President of Hamtramck

works department of the city of Detroit, which city has been getting its cinders in Hamtramck free ever since.

Tony Lipka operates the biggest pool room in Hamtramck. He aspired to the office of village trustee during the last campaign, announced his candidacy and spent money as if he were on shore leave. Tony is a friend of mine and I knew the reward of the trustee, theoretically at least, was nothing

but empty honor and vain glory. I know Tony very well. And I didn't think at the time he was that vain. So I put the question that I knew was on the lips of many a more timid and unquestioning friend.

"How come?" I asked him in the way Tony himself would have abridged an inquisition.

For a minute my civic sensibilities were shocked.

"Give me a trusteeship for two years and I'm through with politics," he answered. "It'll be worth at least \$30,000 a year to me."

I looked the other way.

Tony continued:

"Business hasn't been so good lately. And you know the way these folks from the old country look up to a public official. They worship you if you are in authority. Give me a trusteeship—make me an alderman—and I'll have every pool table in my joint going every minute. Be worth at least \$30,000 a year and every dollar of it honest."

Tony, by the way, was defeated.

Sheriffs, prosecutors, grand juries, even newspaper editors have about given Hamtramck up.

A newspaper reporter was recently sent into the village to get a story on prohibition enforcement. He struck the chief of police when that official was in his most investigative mood.

It was shortly after some of the more venturesome brewers had started sending out four per cent beer after having closed down following the advent of prohibition.

"I know where we can get a good glass of real beer, Al," said the chief to the scribe.

They were already on their way.

"I don't want any of my men to see us," explained the chief, as they turned down a side street.

He was a new chief.

They reached the railroad tracks and dodged switch engines and climbed box cars. They lowered them-

selves through a coal chute, ruining clothes and complexions. When they landed in the engine room of the brewery they were dirty and thirsty, but satisfied that they had escaped prying eyes. They climbed a stairway and entered the tap room. They were greeted with lusty cheers from seven men who had long preceded them.

"Lo, chief."

"Lo, ol' boy."

"How's a big noise?"

"Ray."

Just greetings from the seven men who had lingered long in the tap room. They were seven of the most loyal of the chief's finest.

The county held another of its grand jury investigations into the affairs of the village last year. It was personally conducted by Attorney-General Alex J. Groesbeck, who has since become governor of the state. Two justices of the peace were removed from office for several varieties of misfeasance and malfeasance, including the appropriating of public funds. One of the justices paid a fine. If he had promptly obeyed all court orders he wouldn't have suffered any worse penalty. But he got himself into contempt of court and had to go to jail for 10 days. When he got out of his difficulty he went back to the practice of law in his home village.

The simple folk, having fully expected their fellow townsman and judge to go to the penitentiary, were as astonished as overjoyed to see him. His law practice grew in a few weeks to proportions of which he had never dreamed.

"If the judge can do this for himself when he admits his guilt, what can he not do for us?" reasoned the people. "He must have something on these county officials."

The township government, apart from the village government, is a political luxury the village clings to at a tremendous expense to the taxpayers. The village has grown until there is but a narrow strip of land in the township outside the village. Less than 100 voters live in this territory. For this handful of people the township government, with its expensive machinery, still exists. The village has the votes to abolish this useless appendage at any time. But the people continue to maintain two sets of offices, village and township.

Duplication of work alone costs approximately \$100,000 a year. But it gives the people two of their colorful elections a year instead of one. It provides offices for twice as many of the faithful.

Little wonder that the immigrant looks with amazement on some of the manifestations of American politics and finds himself enticed into its giddy whirl ere he has become a citizen.

The campaign leading up to the last election was the most lively and costly in village history. Political parties were organized with the thoroughness which characterizes a national presidential campaign.

Each party employed its publicity agents, advertising writers and artists. Each had its newspaper, which lasted until the end of the campaign, when the only surviving publication, the organ of the successful party, became the "official" paper of the village, with a contract of 90 per cent "fat."

Some of the candidates made the old-time saloon campaign. One of the political organizations made no appeal to the public except in bar rooms. Nightly members of this organization made the rounds. Whiskey was 50 to 75 cents a drink and beer 25 to 50 cents a glass. After each round bartenders rang up any sum from \$25 to \$100.

Hamtramck was vivid with color and wild with excitement on Sunday, the day before election. Each party held its parade, with mass meetings following. One parade was more than a mile long. In addition to its band and marchers, there were 200 automobiles in line. The town was plastered with posters and banners and the streets were dazzling with brilliant hues. The national dress of a score of European countries was on display. One of the bands, a famous Detroit organization, numbered 52 pieces. After the public parade, an informal procession led by this band made the rounds of what some folks call soft drink parlors. It was a big Lord's Day in Hamtramck.

This campaign did have its respectable side.

Two state senators were brought on to convince the people that the Republican party, the real article, was out to give Hamtramck a good administration. A member of the Republican state central committee delivered a speech in which he declared the eyes of the nation were on this election—that it was the first time since Mr. Harding had become President that any body of voters anywhere in America had been called on to endorse or repudiate the new National Administration.

Attorney Charles P. O'Neill, one of Michigan's best Republican orators, the man who made the speech seconding the nomination of Hiram Johnson at Chicago, pleaded with Hamtramck to serve notice to the world that the Republican party was in as good a reputation as it was last November when it swept the country and wrested the national government from Woodrow Wilson.

On election day there were fights and arrests and children injured when they got in the way of fast electioneering parties. There were the state police, squads of deputy sheriffs and armies of special police and detectives. There were brawls and injunctions and civic temperature mounted high.

And Warren Gamaliel Harding was repudiated.